

State's higher-ed officials play it smart

Editorial

07/16/06

Messenger-Inquirer

For anyone yearning to read something thoroughly positive about Kentucky, check out the Southern Regional Education Board's recent report "Holding Colleges and Universities Accountable for Meeting State Needs" -- part of the SREB's "Challenge to Lead" education goals series.

According to the SREB, the great challenge faced by policymakers and education leaders in the South over the years has been to identify the best ways to measure the quality and efficiency of higher education institutions. While all the states in the region have made progress focusing on the quality and efficiency of their postsecondary schools, a few have been successful in focusing them on fulfilling the needs of their states. Some have developed public agendas for building a well-educated work force.

Kentucky receives high marks in the 15-page report for its "Five Questions -- One Mission" approach to setting its agenda. Kentucky, Oklahoma and Tennessee were praised for setting the example for the rest of the states with their plans for higher education by drawing on leadership throughout state agencies and identifying state needs in which higher education institutions can play a part.

The report notes that Kentucky was one of the first in the region to adopt an agenda. The primary goal -- to "set Kentucky on the path to achieving economic opportunity and a standard of living above the national average in 20 years" -- was written into state law in 1997. A year before that, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education identified five key questions to guide the process.

These are the questions: Are more Kentuckians ready for postsecondary education? Is Kentucky postsecondary education affordable for its citizens? Do more Kentuckians have certificates and degrees? Are college graduates prepared for life and work in Kentucky? Are Kentucky's people, communities and economy benefiting?

So far, very good, according to the SREB report, which notes that the National Center for Higher Education Management System staff described Kentucky's progress in the last 10 years as "nothing short of remarkable." In that decade, postsecondary enrollment increased 25 percent, and the number of degrees and certificates awarded is up 56 percent.

Progress was evident in May, when seven of the eight Kentucky public universities increased the number of degrees they awarded in the past year, a 12.3 percent jump overall. Western Kentucky University led the 2006 boom with a 27.6 percent increase in degrees awarded.

Kentucky still has a long way to go in higher education performance. The number of Kentuckians ages 25-64 with bachelor's degrees is far less than the national average (18.8 percent in 2004 compared to 29.1 percent nationally). In 2020, the national figure is predicted to be 32 percent, which Kentucky hopes to match -- a daunting task just 14 years away.

Kentucky also lags the national and regional averages in two-year and four-year postsecondary faculty pay, and fewer than half of students entering four-year institutions graduate within six years.

But as the SREB report shows, Kentucky is on the right track with its system of accessing its

higher education performance. When the day arrives that this state can answer "yes" enthusiastically to each of the five questions it has posed for itself, the quality of life in Kentucky will be higher, and its citizens better prepared for the future.

[Back to top](#)